An Examination of the Impact of Media Literacy Programs on Reengaging High School Dropouts in the Academic Process

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Introduction

What is the day like for a typical high school student? He wakes up, brushes his teeth, washes his face, checks his MySpace homepage, and scurries to the kitchen to eat breakfast while perhaps watching television or reading the newspaper. After narrowly catching the bus to school, he will pass dozens of billboards and advertisements across rooftops and bus stop displays, and finally arrive at school, where he reads his textbook, literature, or perhaps a newspaper. Some schools provide access to Channel One News, a current events TV program that airs in classrooms, which provides information to students on teen issues, current events, college preparation, etc.[1] Channel One has come under criticism for exposing youth to unnecessary advertising, including ads for Skittles and Twinkies[2]. Following this, he goes home, plays video games, surfs the web, checks his MySpace and Facebook homepages, does his homework, eats dinner and goes to sleep. Now imagine the day for a high-school dropout; he will do most of the same things, except get on the bus and travel to school. A high school dropout does not have the benefit of a teacher who can educate him on the way in which the world works or answer the difficult questions about historical events. A dropout is exposed to the same media influences, but may not be equipped with the necessary analytical skills to understand them.

This research paper will explore the role that media literacy skills have played in youth education. The research will look specifically at connections between the high

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[1] http://www.channelone.com/static/about/
[2] http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1565

school drop-out rate and the effect that media literacy education programs can have on lowering the drop out rate and reengaging youth in educational programs, such as GED, vocational, or college preparatory training.   The purpose of conducting this research is to identify alternative methods of engaging and educating school-age, out-of-school youth and encouraging their excitement about the learning process, through the utilization of popular culture in the classroom, critical analysis of media and experience as creators of media.   This issue is particularly relevant today because society is increasingly operating in a digital, media rich environment and it is imperative that young people be prepared to utilize this technology in the future.   The importance is heightened when considering that the high school drop-out rate has remained fairly constant[3] over the last twenty years, especially for emigrated and minority youth, and does not appear poised to change in the foreseeable future.   If programs in place that are aimed at keeping youth engaged were working, the drop out rate would likely be showing more of a downward turn.   The status dropout rate refers to high school age youth who have not received a diploma or have not enrolled in school (Institute for Education Sciences 2004).   The dropout problem is still a pervasive issue since status dropout rates have remained pretty even to make the total national dropout rate about 10%[4], a decrease of about 5% since 1972 when statistics were first recorded.   However, as of 2004, the status dropout rate of Hispanic youth was 24% and the status dropout rate for African-American youth was 12%.   To put that into perspective, over the course of the 2003-2004 school year, the dropout rate in the city of Philadelphia was 5.4%[5], compared to 6.1%[6] during the 2001-2002 school year.   Despite these numbers, scholars agree that the issue of retention is not going away and is one that researchers will be addressing even in years to come (Rumberger 101, Eckstein, 1295).   Educators and administrators need to reevaluate existing programs because the lack of significant decrease in the numbers suggests that the programs are not working.   Gaining media

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[3] National Center for Education Statistics.   "Dropout Rates in the United States: 2004". Institute for Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education).   November 2006, Pg. 25.
[4] http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/figures/1-figure-1.gif
[5] Richard Hruska, Educational Statistics Associate.   Pennsylvania Department of Education.   "Public Secondary School Dropouts by School: 2003-2004".
[6] Richard Hruska, Educational Statistics Associate.   Pennsylvania Department of Education.   "Public Secondary School Dropouts in Pennsylvania in 2001-2002".

literacy skills, (including skills in critical analysis and media production) can be empowering and provide an effective foundation for young people to accomplish whatever they want to do in life (Goodman 58, 103-104).

Media literacy can be defined in a number of different ways and has taken on different meanings over the years.   The Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute defines it as, "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms, an expansion of traditional conceptualizations of literacy to include a wide range of symbolic forms"[7].   This definition encompasses using media tools, such as video, audio, print and multimedia, to learn the critical literacy skills traditionally taught through only print and text materials.   In more recent years, media literacy has also come to include analysis and critique of the media as a means to provide commentary on the media's effect on society.   As new technologies permeate society and become the common tools of our daily interactions, and as the mainstream media play a critical role in shaping our use of these technologies, a new school of commentary has emerged focused on requiring accountability from media institutions so that they don't take advantage of this power.   In addition to analysis and critique, new media production can be grouped into media literacy skills training[8].   With the technologies for creation becoming more user-friendly and more accessible, the gap that once existed between the media and the consumer has been just about eliminated and the consumer is now the producer.   Shrinking file sizes, widened bandwidth and the internet have allowed user generated content to be made accessible to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Understanding how to responsibly use these tools is as important as making sure that they are used effectively.

Youth are exposed to media from the time they wake up in the morning (from the corporate branding that takes place with their brand of toothpaste) to the time they go to sleep (the character pajamas they wear).   They are exposed to print (in the form of newspapers and textbooks), television, radio and music, video games, and the internet. All of these play an important role in the development of youth (Tyner 2, 42).   This impact supports the notion that youth must be active consumers of media instead of

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[7] Hobbs, R. (1998). The seven great debates in the media literacy movement. Journal of Communication, 48(1):16-32.

[8] Buckingham, David. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

passive consumers.   An active consumer of media is someone who is conscious of the different types of media that they consume as well as the particular content within each media.   A young person that only plays sports video games is one such example. Alternatively, there are passive consumers of media, people whose preference for media is arbitrarily defined.   An example of this would be a young person who spends hours a day watching whatever is on television.

In terms of communication theory, this habit of active and passive consumerism is sometimes referred to as instrumental and ritualistic viewing.   Judith Van Evra uses these to describe television viewing in her book, *Television and Child Development*. She writes that instrumental viewing is done with a purpose and is often characterized by "selective, purposeful, and infrequent" use (13).   This obviously translates to someone who is a more active participant in the media.   They are making carefully planned decisions about the content to which they are exposed.   Alternatively, there are ritualistic viewers, those that are habitual, nondiscriminatory consumers that watch for enjoyment and diversion (13).   The biggest distinction between instrumental and ritualistic habits is that instrumental users consume for information and are much more concerned with content, while ritualistic users consume because of habit; viewing is a ritual, an automatic action.   Youth can often be characterized as ritualistic users, or passive consumers, of media.   Their choices are usually subjective and are often influenced by friends, family, and mainstream media.   They often listen to whatever is popular on the radio, play the hot new video game(s) that their friends have, or watch what is on television because their parents are watching it.   The internet has changed this to some degree because websites often specialize in specific information and not more generalized content.   According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the main reason teenagers use the internet is to communicate with their peers, but a growing number of students are using the internet to do schoolwork[9].   They are using the internet more instrumentally by exposing themselves to specific websites and controlling the content that they are accessing, and thereby becoming more active users.

There is no recipe for learning how to become an active consumer of the media and most people accept the media uncritically because they play such a huge role in our lives.   Additionally most students benefit from their interaction with their teachers who

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[9] http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/163/report_display.asp

can help shape their worldview and provide a mediating influence on their lives. George Gerbner calls this Cultivation Theory, the belief that opinions about reality are shaped by mediating influences (Van Evra 6).   He developed the theory specifically to discuss the impact that television had on shaping perception.   He believed that people who were heavy viewers of television would adopt a worldview that was similar to what they were watching on television; a worldview that is shaped by fictional programming and gatekeeper influenced shows.   This can be applied to a school setting because teachers hold the answers to the important questions that students have about the nature of the world and how society works.   Society trusts them to do this because they are educated and trained to deal with our children.   Dropouts don't have an educator to act as a buffer to the information they receive or to which they are exposed.   Their worldview is shaped by their experiences and while many dropouts come from the inner city, the media helps to cultivate a perception outside of this experience.   For example, a dropout in Philadelphia might only develop an understanding about the south from programming he sees on television.   This could lead to stereotyping and generalizations that are unfounded and inaccurate.   Other youth who are in school will have the opportunity to clarify these opinions and will be equipped with the necessary tools to critically analyze this visual information better in the future.

The creation and implementation of youth media literacy programs can challenge youth to be able to critically analyze media texts and produce works that enable them to become media authors.   The ability to produce and create media is especially important for youth because it provides an outlet for self expression and to a way to respond to contemporary issues. Teachers and adults who don't typically listen to teens, seem to hear their voices more clearly when they are voiced through a familiar media.   Delores, a student at Project H.O.M.E. commented, "I love making videos because I get to learn so much and then I am actually teaching my teachers at school.   I know something they don't and it feels good".   Authorship also allows youth to express social criticism that is often reserved for a more exclusive section of the population, or those who have the means and the resources, especially with the advent of video streaming on the internet. The new technology allows youth to transmit their messages and voices across the world.

Literature Review

One of the guiding leaders of education reform in the 20th Century is Paulo Freire, an exiled Brazilian philosopher and educator, who wrote at length about developing a literate populace in Brazil so that they would be better informed when voting in elections.   Where Freire distinguishes himself from traditional education thinkers is in his belief in teaching the masses.   Traditional classrooms place a given number of students in chairs at desks, typically in rows and columns, or in clusters, while the teacher stands and lectures about a given topic.   This model has been very effective for decades and provides an adequate means to impart necessary information to students. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire questions whether this model of teaching is the most effective.   He terms this model, the "banking approach", meaning information is disseminated from the teachers to the students and they are expected to store it away in their brains until it comes time to access it again.   In contemporary society, the results of this approach are reflected in our reliance on standardized tests, which have been criticized for not accurately portraying a student's true capability, forcing teachers 'to teach to the test' and not giving the student the best academic experience.   (Sacks 1)

Freire, however, proposes a different model of education, one rooted in the philosophies of Marx, Socialism, and Fanon.   Freire advocates for a co-operational approach to learning.   He believes that dialogue is essential to the completion of a person in a true humanist society and that this dialogue must occur between the learned and the learners in order to be able to identify the important truth questions for understanding and critically evaluating the society in which one lives (Freire 70).   The truth questions which he speaks of are the starting points where this exploration can occur and are dictated by the learners.   The masses need to be educated, according to Freire, because they will then be better able to understand the inequity that takes place in society; they will understand the true nature of society.   From this dialogue between the educator and the student(s), a curriculum will develop which blends the information to be learned with the academic desires of the students.   By giving students a voice in the education they are receiving, it is more likely to have a practical value for them.

"When will I ever use this when I am an adult?" students say when frustrated

with math problems, science formulas, or cramming dates in history.   Freire argues that students would benefit from learning this information differently by highlighting the practical, real-world value.   He writes, attributing this development to Gabriel Bode, a Chilean civil servant:

> "The greatest achievement of Gabriel Bode is that, by means of
> the dialectics between the essential and the auxiliary codifications, he has
> managed to communicate to the participants a sense of totality.
> Individuals who were submerged in reality, merely feeling their needs,
> emerge from reality and perceive the causes of their needs." (Freire 97).

Freire sees this as an expression of the ability and necessity for an educator to use a method of logical reasoning to decipher themes that are most important for uneducated people.   Only after this is done will the participants engage in the material they are learning.   What Bode did and what Freire advocates for is learning side-by-side, or learning co-operatively, in a way that presents the information as useful to the newly educated.   Once students are able to decode familiar themes or topics, they can move onto other more traditional educational curriculum.

The importance of media literacy programs can further be seen in Freire's writing, when he writes,

> "The investigation of thematics, involves the investigation of the
> people's thinking—thinking which occurs only in and among people
> together seeking out reality.   I cannot think for others or without others,
> nor can others think for me.   Even if the people's thinking is
> superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action
> that they can change.   Producing and acting upon their own ideas must
> constitute that process." (Freire 89).

Asking questions and critical analysis of ideas is at the core of this quote, and at the core of media literacy.   Media literacy programs can give students the opportunity to explore issues and themes connected to their lives.   In this method, students are involved in the decision-making process, which Freire would argue is imperative for their academic development, so that they can learn to become independent thinkers and

in turn, assist others who don't possess these interpretive skills.

An important thought leader connecting educational innovation and media literacy is Steve Goodman. His foresight in understanding the importance of youth media literacy and its impact on youth development has been profound in increasing awareness of this growing research field. Goodman started the Educational Video Center in New York City in 1984 to offer documentary production classes to high school students, many of them considered at-risk[10]. During a recent phone interview, he elaborated on many of the key points articulated in his book, *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production and Social Change*. Goodman co-opts the Freire model of education and learning in order to apply it to media literacy production and analysis programs for youth.

Goodman writes, "The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), affirms that children and young people should have a say in matters that affect their well-being. The United States is the only country that has failed to ratify the convention." (Goodman 104). Goodman et al argues that it is important to include those being educated in the process of establishing curricula. The point reiterates Freire's argument that an understanding and co-operation in education is necessary for constructive learning to take place. Goodman's purpose in including this passage is to highlight the rigidity of the United States public education system in altering designs of learning instead relying on traditional methods and implementing further measures that don't evaluate true comprehension and application, but favor maintaining the status quo. In the particular case of out-of-school youth, one gets a sense of how positively they may respond based on the programs they voluntarily select. If one were to look at the programs made available and the programs that the students attended, a clear idea of what motivates them would emerge. It is worth asking why the programs that have been made available have not changed the dropout rate? One factor might be that the programs offered to the students are not highly appealing. High School dropouts may favor one class over another, but they are choosing the "lesser of two evils". If students are given a choice in what topics they want to explore and develop a media literacy curriculum to incorporate those ideas, they are less apt to regard education as something that controls them. They will feel as if they have some authority and power to affect

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[10] http://www.evc.org/about/history.html

decisions that are made.   In turn, this will affect the quality of their work.

Standardized tests have become the main measure used to evaluate overall academic performance since the No Child Left Behind Act.   Goodman agrees that the result, or end product, is more important.   Educators and others need a tangible way to measure the effectiveness of a program; be it an after-school video production course or a unit on the Civil War in junior high school.   This is necessary so that educators will know whether to implement these programs in the future or eliminate them so that more effective programs can be run.   In addition, Goodman writes that the process of participation is invaluable in considering the academic development of a student. Goodman talks about both the process and the product being valuable, specifically in the context of media production programs, because each serves a specific purpose in creating an educational and valuable experience (Goodman, 106).   Media production programs differ from media analysis in that they put the media-making tools in the hands of the youth.   First, students develop necessary social capital through engaging with members of society; often adults with whom they need contact to complete projects.   These projects allow students to develop skills such as interpersonal communication, public speaking, and networking, which may lead to career opportunities (Goodman 106). These jobs might be with the people with whom they are speaking, or with other companies doing similar work.   The students have developed the tools to compete with candidates who may have more traditional academic credentials and they now have contacts that can provide character references for future employers.   Prior to working on these projects the youth didn't have any contacts and would be provided with no opportunity to acquire new contacts.   Secondly, the programs can also be stepping stones to continue education.   Video production is not frequently offered in public schools[11].   If provided at all, video production is typically in the context of another unit of study by a progressive thinking teacher or as an after-school program.   Students are excited about participating in these production programs and want to continue to learn these skills[12].   Often, the only outlet for learning in a constructive and organized setting is at the collegiate level, where they can learn from professionals and further their social

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[11] Gregory E. Thornton. "Literacy, Mathematics and Science 2006-2007 Course of Study High School." The School District of Philadelphia. http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/curriculum

[12] Conversation with Steve Goodman, February 22, 2007.

development.

This is also true for high school dropouts. The Educational Video Center works predominantly with high school dropouts on video production programs and much of Goodman's research has been with this population. Media literacy production programs might be more important for high school dropouts because they don't have the structure of school or perhaps a strong home life to be able to encourage them to develop social and professional skills, whereas non-profit organizations and out-of-school centers often have the staff and resources to train youth[13]. High school student's dropout for a number of different reasons, including academic difficulties, familial obligations, economic hardships, or in the estimation of some scholars, because youth place a greater value on leisure time than on school and a low motivation/desire. These programs help students who dropout reconnect to their community and develop a civic awareness they hadn't had before. The students also learn a new, creative, innovative medium and how to use this to give back. They produce a finished product everybody can share in and have a helping hand in creating; be it a video, song, poem, etc. Media literacy provides youth with a way to bond with their neighbors, connect with their peers, and interact with professionals who can help them obtain jobs.

Goodman is a proponent of "reimagining the school day". He uses this phrase to describe education reform that utilizes media literacy education, not just production, but analysis, as well, as part of mainstream high school curricula (Goodman 107). He sees the current weekday for children as being broken up into two parts, the school day, while they are in school, and the after-school day, which is the part of the day in-between school and the time they can go home. Goodman wants to take the positive elements of both and combine the two parts (Goodman 102). Goodman believes most youth trudge along throughout the day looking forward to the time after-school when they can engage in exciting and stimulating activity that is not offered in school. By taking aspects of both and incorporating them, Goodman believes students will be engaged and enthusiastic throughout the entire school day. His works uses media literacy as the means to this end. Although Goodman believes this is a valid educational option for all students, he is particularly interested in its impact on high school dropouts and this issue of engagement. Research shows that high school dropouts leave school for a number of

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[13] Conversation with Steve Goodman, February 22, 2007.

reasons, one being that they cannot learn in a traditional setting[14].   Some kids are not given the opportunity to enroll in alternative high schools or charter schools and, therefore, 'fall through the cracks' because no one is paying attention to their needs.   If utilizing a media literacy curriculum proves to be an effective way to keep them engaged during the school day, they may sustain their interest in the academic process and not resort to dropping out again.

Renee Hobbs, a leader in media literacy education initiatives, recently released *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English*, which looks at introducing media literacy analysis into a high school curriculum.   Hobbs cites a work by Robert Scholes, an advocate of overhauling English education taught in schools through the investigation of the meaning-making process.   This education reform concept is similar to Freire and Goodman.   Hobbs uses her experience incorporating a media literacy curriculum at Concord High School in Massachusetts to illustrate the importance of media literacy education as a way to make sure youth build an understanding and appreciation for media texts, which are so pervasive in their lives. (Hobbs 7)   In the context of high school dropouts, this is important because they are exposed to the same media texts as others their age, but are not in a position to analyze these texts in an educational setting.

In Hobbs' study, students were clearly bringing their media literacy learning beyond the classroom.   Parents of the students in the high school told the teachers that their children were discussing topics and themes at home that were related to the media literacy they had learned in class.   One teacher commented to Hobbs that the students in the media literacy class were not at the top of their class and would not otherwise be discussing academic subjects outside of school and with their parents (Hobbs 30).   This example shows that media literacy can be an important tool in allowing youth to engage in academic discourse, as well as showing how students less interested in typical school-curriculum may be lead to engage in academic topics.

Hobbs study clearly showed that the media literacy program implemented in Concord High School succeeded in achieving two outcomes.   It exposed the students to a new style of learning and reinforced and enhanced some major learning outcomes, such as critical thinking, writing skills, research skills, and the importance of working with

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[14] http://www.focusas.com/Dropouts.html

others as well as working independently (Hobbs 148-149).

Skills that educators aim to pass along to their students are referred to as Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. These objectives are the foundation for core literacy standards, like analysis, evaluation, and creation[15]. These same skills help high school dropouts to be productive members of society. Hobbs notes that the engagement does not need to be in a high school setting, but rather in a setting where learning is cultivated and conditioned by educators that care about the process and about the youth. Hobbs saw how teachers struggled with balancing their own bias and opinion about the media, and overcame these obstacles to present a balanced curriculum to the students (Hobbs 154-155). High school dropouts, too, require skilled practitioners who care about their unique needs and interests, who will listen to their concerns when it comes to education, and who will present a curriculum that will engage them and allow them to achieve the same learning outcomes as their traditional school counterparts.

Methodology

The methodology for this research project relied on two approaches. The first approach was through literary and scholarly research, and included reading primary and secondary published materials, such as books, journal articles, and reputable websites. The second, and more qualitative measure, was by conducting field research. Since the paper focuses on high school dropouts it was important to meet and speak with those students, as well as educators and scholars who work with an out-of-school population and are familiar with programs and education objectives employed for this population. Aside from research cited throughout the paper, most of the primary texts are discussed in the above Literature Review. The interviews required finding a wide range of subjects who would provide a great amount of depth and understanding on the issue. Three separate locations were utilized. Together, they provided access to three distinct groups of students.

The first location was the Honickman Learning Center and Comcast Technology Labs facility run by Project H.O.M.E., in North Central Philadelphia. Although this group does not comprise high school dropouts, interviews were conducted with the youth

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[15] *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*; pp. 201-207; B. S. Bloom (Ed.) Susan Fauer Company, Inc. 1956.

because they could provide some valuable information regarding the effect that media literacy had on their schoolwork and their attitudes regarding school.   The students contribute ideas, write the articles, take photographs, and write the entire editorial. Bozzone assists in the editorial and layout phase.   Their newspaper focuses on issues ranging from community outreach, teen issues, and other social justice issues.   The passion of the kids is visible as is their appreciation for the value that media literacy plays in their academic experience.   All of the participants are energetic and enthusiastic to begin projects once they arrive at the center and many commented that they have been able to utilize skills they have learned in their class work.   Bozzone also commented that all of the students' grades have seen a marked improvement since they enrolled.

The second location in which interviews were conducted was the Digital Media Training (DMT) program provided by Youth Empowerment Services (YES).

The program works strictly with current high school dropouts to provide the technical skills necessary to understand video, film, and television production.   The objective of the program is to prepare youth for entering the job market and prepare them for obtaining equivalency and advanced degrees.   Here, none of the students interviewed had obtained an equivalency degree or had come close to completing their high school work[16].   All of the students entered the program voluntarily because they were interested in obtaining the video production training.   None of the students had any experience with these tools and equipment, but all entertained thoughts of pursuing careers in different areas of the media as a result of the program.

The third and final location was an alternative high school called Fairhill Community High School located in the West Kensington section of North Philadelphia. The unique aspect of this school is that it is a 'private/public high school'.   The school was founded by International Educational and Community Initiatives/One Bright Ray, Incorporated, but is contracted by the School District of Philadelphia to serve Philadelphia youth.   The school operates with a more "nonprofit mentality"; it is a place where faculty is given flexibility to design creative and inventive curricula to keep the students motivated and the "school year" is not set up like a traditional high school.

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[16] These current students had only been enrolled in the DMT program for four weeks when the interviews were conducted, so their ability to articulate their experience was limited and difficult.

They have quarter sessions, almost like a fiscal quarter in a business, where the students complete a new unit of study every quarter.   The student population is extremely diverse, with kids from different educational backgrounds[17].   According to English studies teacher Dana Gubitosa, the kids who enroll do so for a number of different reasons; some transfer from more traditional schools, some have had academic difficulties and this is a second chance for them, and some have dropped out in the past and are returning to school.

        This group had a great deal to say and was an interesting group to interview because of their unique ability to articulate their experience in a media literacy program. They also fit the research interest, blending high school dropouts with media literacy education.   The students had participated in an eight-week media literacy course sponsored by the Media Education Lab at Temple University, founded by Renee Hobbs, who also helped evaluate and oversee progress of the course for each of the four class sections that participated.   The students were interviewed as a group, rather than individually due to time constraints.

        The discussion with many of the student's reaffirmed information gleaned from the other two locations.   In addition, at Fairhill, there were a number of students who had participated in the unit, but only a few spoke during the interview session.   There are a number of different factors that could have contributed to the lack of participation amongst the group; students may have disliked the media literacy curriculum and been reluctant to say so, they may be shy, or they may have agreed with their classmates and felt no reason to speak.   Despite this, it was obvious from their replies that a number of them had a tremendously positive experience and did not think about the possible negative aspects of the unit.   However, it is important to note that they were not asked directly for a negative assessment.   When asked if they would change anything about the program, one student responded, "It was perfect and there was nothing I would do differently.   I would want to do this in all my classes".

Key Findings

KEY FINDING: Media literacy programs can have a profound

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[17] It should be noted that about half the group had not participated in the media literacy unit because they had enrolled at FCHS after the unit was completed and they also replaced a number of students who had participated that subsequently left school.

impact in

#1   empowering dropouts.

Numerous students stated that prior to beginning their media literacy training, they had no particular interest in participating in the traditional high school classes (physics, world history, calculus, etc) and commented that school had become boring for them.   This was one contributing factor that influenced their decision to dropout.

 In turn, the media literacy tools, both production and analysis, provide a means by which youth can express themselves.   This expression takes many forms.   At Project H.O.M.E., the youth comment and reflect on issues most directly affecting their community and their lives.   At Youth Empowerment Services, the youth create video works that allow them to tell their stories.   And, at Fairhill, the work challenges them to question social issues and combine traditional educational evaluative tools with new media technology, by completing essays using Internet-based research and   film analysis.   Not only do they gain a valuable understanding of how to use these tools, but students say it gives them a sense of accomplishment and feeling that they can complete anything.   One student at Fairhill said, "Now, I feel like I can do anything and complete anything because of the skills that I learned from media literacy".   Of particular excitement at Project H.O.M.E., one young middle school student had an editorial published in the Philadelphia Daily News, an accomplishment that was rewarded, but not unexpected or surprising, considering this student and the journalism class publishes a newspaper three times a year.   As with this young teen, the youth engaging in these programs are forcing adults to recognize and notice that they have a powerful voice and message, and now a means to present that message to the world.   One student explained they feel that adults are starting to listen to them and realize that they are discussing issues and topics with a maturity not often seen in many adults.   He says, "I can talk to an adult and they will listen to me, but before, they would just ignore whatever I had to say".   As part of the media literacy project at Fairhill Community High School, one student presented a PowerPoint slideshow he created at Temple University.   Members of the crowd later commented to the instructor their disbelief that the student was still just in high school.

The success stories of these students are a strong endorsement for the

empowering nature of media literacy education. These benefits affect the students' sensibilities as people capable of learning. The skills lay the foundation for learning. These skills are necessary for students that have been disenfranchised by traditional educational settings. However, educators and funders are looking for more traditional educational objectives to be met as well. Media literacy is not just about understanding media impact, but about using media to develop the language and critical thinking skills students required to pursue advanced degrees and compete for high-paying jobs in a wide array of different industries.

KEY FINDING: #2   **Dropouts are able to develop and learn critical literacy skills from media literacy programs.**

One of the goals of any literacy program is to have the students end up meeting the important learning outcomes, like critical analysis, reading and writing comprehension, information acquisition, and synthesis of information. As the Hobbs case study showed, the students at Concord were able to achieve these outcomes using media literacy as effectively as a traditional English unit would. This is evidence that media literacy programs can work in imparting these skills to youth. But the question becomes, how will this mode of learning work with dropouts? There is nothing intrinsically different about high school dropouts, aside from the fact that some factor compelled them to leave the traditional school setting and many times the reason is due to adverse feelings toward traditional school settings[18]. It is important to figure out creative and innovative ways to teach these skills so that students continue to participate and remain active.

The Fairhill students exhibit enhanced traditional literacy skills. Following the completion of the media literacy unit, they have had projects that require analysis of primary and secondary texts, and have been able to synthesize the information much quicker than in the past prior to the media literacy unit, according to their teacher. This also helps improve problem solving and abstract thinking skills, which can translate to more technical subjects, like mathematics and science. The students are forced to draw conclusions about facts given and excluded, in order to understand and derive the truth. The ability to synthesize information from different sources, as well as make conclusions

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[18] http://www.focusas.com/Dropouts.html

and form opinions is a direct learning outcome of media literacy education. These were skills developed from looking at films and newspaper articles, and doing the same kinds of work that they would be doing if they were just reading a book about the same subject matter. One student said, "Before the media literacy program, I couldn't read a book and find the hidden messages. Now I can pick it apart and really analyze it." This shows a much greater dedication to developing analytical skills than the students had before, which was a product of the media literacy program.

This leads to another development of a critical educational objective, which is the students' ability to develop a point-of-view. This is different from developing analytical skills because the students are now able to cultivate and articulate their opinion on any issue, as opposed to just understanding what the issues are.

Many students, especially, at Fairhill, commented that prior to taking a media literacy class they would enter situations with a preconceived viewpoint. This has changed as a result of the media literacy class. The students learned how to remain unbiased when looking for information to develop their points of view. When asked how many students watch the news on a more regular basis after completing the program than they did before, all the participants raised their hands. The students developed the ability to seek out the information themselves. In both school settings and the workplace, there is a tremendous amount of importance placed on the ability to gather information and conduct work without very much instruction. It shows that students can be trusted with extremely complicated tasks and teachers, and eventually employers, believe that they will be completed. This is a skill that can be difficult to acquire in more traditional settings, but is taught and utilized at every moment within media literacy education. Whether through production or analysis, students in a media literacy class need to acquire information to complete whatever project is put forth. New media technologies, like the Internet, make this extremely efficient and easy for students, especially the dropouts at Fairhill and Youth Empowerment Services because they have access to these materials.

Key Finding: **There is dearth of research and information on**

#3   **programs that reengage dropouts.**

While much of the primary research has been conducted from interviews with students, educators, and administrators, it was important to supplement this with scholarly research that had been conducted in the field before.   Unfortunately, there has been little research done on specific media literacy programming that reengages youth. There are wonderful resources about programming available, such as the Out-of-School-Time-Resource Center at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as the Office of Transition and Alternative Education operated by the School District of Philadelphia, but these are outlets for parents and students to reference when deciding to find programs, not to mention that the OSTRC deals mostly with programming for the times of the day when kids are not in school (after-school, summer, etc.).   Similar resources are being offered by organizations all over the country, like the nonprofit School's Out Washington, in Seattle, and the Chicago Out-of-School Time Project co-sponsored by After School Matters and the Department of Children and Youth Services in Chicago.   It is important to note that there has been some research conducted that examines the tendency of students to decide to dropout, but since the dropout rate has remained constant over the past twenty years or so, it is important to question the effectiveness of the programs currently in place.

The lack of research suggests that this population is marginalized in society and more needs to be done to figure out ways in which to better address their needs.   There could be a number of reasons why programs haven't affected the dropout rate or reengaged youth.   One of the biggest issues plaguing nonprofits and many government organizations is a lack of operating expenses[19].   Usually this translates into limited programming with scarce resources.   Lack of funding also hurts the staff because many of the "talented" educators will look for more high paying jobs, leaving less qualified staff to run and operate these programs.   Another factor might be that the programs just aren't interesting or engaging enough to draw the attention of the youth.   This is where

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[19] GuideStar.org. "Nonprofits' Three Greatest Challenges".
http://www.guidestar.org/DisplayArticle.do?articleId=780

getting student feedback becomes important because the programs are for them and about them.   Within the programs students choose, educators can implement learning activities so that the students will start to build those skills.   Like traditional classrooms, these programs are also most effective when they have teachers who care and work hard for the students, though this point is not specific to high school dropouts, but is essential for effective learning in all situations.   All of the students at the three programs visited for this project commented that they loved working with their respective instructor. Even Jon Denenberg, lead video instructor, stays in contact with former students providing mentorship and friendship to them, even including them on side projects he works on.

Key Finding: Dropouts are motivated to remain reengaged when they
#4   have a voice in what they learn.

An early education theorist, David Flinders, writes, "[Education is] the purposeful manipulation of students toward predetermined ends and ignores the experience of the students themselves, viewing it as a contamination of the process"[20].   There are probably educators who think it would be inappropriate and ineffective to give a student the opportunity to decide what they would want to learn.   Most of the time these scholars would probably be correct because students would favor a curriculum devised around television, movies, and video games.   If that were the case, then perhaps it would be best to attempt to design a curriculum around these tools.   These tools could be used in the implementation of curricula that focused on media literacy education to help keep dropouts interested in the process of learning.

Allowing students to have a voice in learning what they want is interesting because personal involvement in any activity increases motivation, in this case motivation to complete their work, help others, and learn things on their own when the material is something that is of particular interest.   If they are able to direct the content then they will not only feel empowered and motivated, but they will achieve the necessary literacy skills because the instructor/teacher will be able to work them into the curriculum.   This is exactly what the class at Fairhill was able to accomplish and the

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[20] Richard L. Hopkins. Narrative Schooling: Experiential Learning and the Transformation of American Education. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1994, 12.

students reflected how refreshing it was to be able to be a part of the class instead of being told what they had to learn. Part of their positive reaction to the unit was the teaching style of the instructor, which favored class discussion as opposed to lecture-style. This echoes Freire's philosophy that they key to keeping them engaged is give them a voice.

Key Finding: Performance-based assessment, like that used in media #5 literacy is more effective than traditional scoring methods as a measure of evaluation for high school dropouts.

The image often portrayed of the American dream has been doing well in school, advance through the ranks to get a job, build a family, and buy a car and a house. When we are young, we are told it begins with school and not only doing well, but also being the best. Unfortunately school does not come as easily to some as it does to others. What is very interesting about all of the programs discussed in this paper and is a common component in most media literacy programs, both analysis and production, is that they use performance-based assessment to evaluate the students in the programs. This is not just with the dropout population, either, this is across the board. This is partially for a few reasons. The first reason is that the nature of a media literacy program is that the information is difficult to quantify on a test. Most of the material is thought-based, analytical, theoretical, or practical, in the case of production. These do not translate well to traditional testing methods, but are realized more easily from essays, student newspapers, or longer form projects. The second reason is that students don't respond favorably when being tested. While it is the case that tests offer a great deal of insight into the amount of information that a student has remembered, it is hard to determine what has been absorbed for future use[21]. It is also a more worthwhile system for students that have not had previous success with test-based assessment. The third reason is that the process is engaging and cooperative, while the end product is tangible and reflects an accumulation of all the information acquired.

John Dewey, one of the founders of Pragmatism and philosopher on education and aesthetics, believed that the greatest educational experience was that which the

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[21] http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v3n6.html

student performed.   The greatest learning experiences are from real life.   He gave as much value to the process as to the end result.   He believed students must engage in the process of learning and one true way is through performance-based assessment.   The tendency with test-based is that the instructor will lecture and teach to the test, or that students will only study the material that will be on the exam, which decreases the value of the experience because their focus is only on the end result.   Intrinsically, Dewey advocates for a higher emphasis on acquiring knowledge for the sake of knowledge, which can be best achieved through performance in the form of production, discussion, and critique.

Key Finding: Media literacy provides relevance in education that
#6   dropouts require for reengagement.

The instructor at Fairhill Community High School stated that the kids' interest was piqued when the subject matter reflected real-world occurrences.   She speculated that the students responded to this work because they "live such real lives... [The class] worked to emphasize the real world component in all of the work they did".   It is important to note the contemporary relevance to the students drawn upon by the instructor here.   Media literacy helps present topics affecting students' lives in an organized, rational way.

Students will respond and react more positively to the educational process and the experience when the information has some real-world applicability.   They are going to be drawn to material that relates to their lives and their previously held experiences, those that they believed were true (Freire 50).

Media literacy programs give them the opportunity to explore real-world issues and themes.   At YES, the students created biographical documentaries that discussed their futures and goals.   Project H.O.M.E. looked at community issues that were important to the students and they created a newspaper with articles, editorials, photographs, and pictures reflecting these.   And, at Fairhill, the students studied the September 11, 2001 destruction at the World Trade Center, which explored issues of politics and war.   The youth discussed family members they lost and some Muslim students talked about the discrimination they endured.   In all three programs, the common thread is promoting an understanding of the students and helping them find

their voice and identity in their communities.

Conclusion

There has been a dearth of scholarly research into the relationship of media literacy and the dropout population, which proved to be very difficult in completing this project. Media literacy education itself is still a very new field of concentration in communications and education scholarship. For researchers, this presents an interesting field of study because the potential for new discovery is so great. As more research is done, perhaps, researchers can figure out the best way to end the dropout problem for students that are just disinterested.

Hobbs book is the first that really looks at media literacy in the classroom and time will tell whether real reform will occur and media literacy will be a larger component of school curricula. Jon Denenberg, the lead video instructor at YES, believes that his program is the best available in the city of Philadelphia and that media literacy education is going to be present in the future. He says, "Video programs are going to keep them engaged more than anything out there. Media is the next big thing in education because it is steeped in culture". Teachers and educators are already beginning to implement new technology into the classroom in order to keep younger children engaged and keep up with new advances[22]. Before long, these new technologies will hopefully be commonplace.

The current administration has tried Band-Aid measures to improve education, like No Child Left Behind, though education funding has increased by 33% since Bush took office in 2001[23]. Unfortunately, new measures are needed to ensure that students remain engaged. It is not just a matter of throwing money at the problem either in the hopes that this will solve the problem. It is about spending the money in the right place and on the right things, like teachers, facilities, resources, etc. Addressing reengagement also calls for a change in programming in the schools, or at least beginning the discussion to implement a more alternative curriculum. So far, traditional means of education have worked for most of the students who go through school, but there are still those 10% who are left behind.

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[22] http://www.educationworld.com/a_tech/archives/technology.shtml
[23] http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2005/02/02232005a.html

As media literacy programs become more prevalent, new research will be considered that looks at the role of media literacy in reengaging young dropouts. One area in particular that will be interesting to conduct more research on is the effect of different evaluation methods and procedures with traditional education settings. Some of this already takes place with alternative based schools, such as the schools that make up the Coalition of Essential Schools in New York City[24]. Utilizing some of the assessment measures that worked with the dropout population in traditional schools would be interesting in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the most effective way to evaluate acquisition of learning outcomes. The above findings present some interesting discoveries that will provide a strong foundation for researchers in the future to implement future projects and shape debate about the role in which they can play. Hopefully researchers will continue to do this valuable work in an important field.

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[24] http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/about/about.html

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